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PROLOGUE

Life or Death

The catastrophe should never have happened. On the morning of April 1, 1919, William Jenkins, the American consul in Odessa, a major Russian port on the Black Sea, walked from his office to the London Hotel, where the French army of occupation had set up its headquarters. He was alarmed by the previous day's setback on the front—Red Guards had driven Greek and French troops from yet another town to the east—and by the hysterical rumors that were sweeping through the scores of thousands of refugees who had fled to Odessa from Soviet territory. He wanted to meet with the French commander himself, General Philippe d'Anselme, and to ask him point-blank what he was going to do in the face of the deteriorating situation. Shortages of food and fuel in the city had become critical. A typhus epidemic was breaking out. Radicalized workers were mutinying and stockpiling guns. And Odessa's notorious criminal gangs vied with the Bolshevik underground in robbing homes and businesses, and murdering anyone who got in their way. Jenkins had compiled a list of twenty-nine Americans in the city, including, against all odds, a black man from Mississippi accompanied by a white wife and four mixed-race children. As consul, Jenkins was responsible for the entire group's safety and was beginning to doubt the resolve and reliability of the French.

Although he would not know it for another thirty-six hours, Jenkins's fears were well founded. The French high command in

Paris had concluded several days earlier that their military intervention in the Russian civil war had been a mistake. However, General d'Anselme skillfully concealed this behind his blunt military manner and proceeded to lie to Jenkins's face.

He began by pretending that he was sharing a confidence with Jenkins, who was, after all, the official representative of an important ally, and admitted that it might perhaps be necessary to evacuate some of the old men, women, and children in Odessa because of food shortages. But when Jenkins pressed the crucial point of a general evacuation of the city, d'Anselme assured him that there was absolutely "no question" of the French army abandoning Odessa.

Jenkins left French headquarters reassured. The following day, Wednesday, April 2, he received written confirmation of what d'Anselme had told him. The French commander also broadcast his message to the city at large by publishing announcements in the local newspapers to the effect that although some civilians would have to be evacuated—he used the strangely callous expression "all useless mouths"—the military situation was secure.

In truth, however, the French had already decided to withdraw all forces from Odessa. But rather than organize an orderly evacuation that might take two weeks—which would have been the only way to accommodate 70,000 troops, their equipment, and anywhere between 50,000 and 100,000 civilians—d'Anselme and his staff decided to keep their decision secret as long as possible. The city was dangerously overcrowded and they hoped to prevent panic. What they achieved instead was the exact opposite and would become known around the world as the French "debacle" in Odessa.

Wednesday passed relatively calmly. All the government offices were open and working. After the sun set, the only disturbances were the occasional, familiar crackle of gunfire and detonations of hand grenades as the city's criminals and Bolsheviks began their nightly depredations. In the inner and outer harbors, the French and other

Allied warships rested reassuringly at anchor. The bivouacs of the Greek, Senegalese, and Algerian Zouave regiments were quiet.

Then, almost by chance, Jenkins learned the incredible news. Around 10 p.m., Picton Bagge, the British commercial attaché in the city, came to him with urgent and confidential information. He had heard from the captain of HMS *Skirmisher*, a British torpedo boat in the harbor—the captain in turn having gotten it from a French admiral in Odessa—that the French had decided to give up the city.

Jenkins was stunned: not only had d'Anselme lied to him, but the French withdrawal meant that the Bolsheviks would be in Odessa in a matter of days. Jenkins also realized that as soon as word got out, the hordes of White Russian refugees from Moscow, Petrograd, and other places in the north would stampede out of terror that the Bolsheviks would massacre them. With escape by land cut off, the only way out was across the Black Sea, and there were not nearly enough ships for everyone. He would have to rush to get his flock aboard a ship while there was still time.

Most of the Americans trapped in Odessa were in Russia because of business and charitable ventures with which Jenkins was familiar. But the black man who had recently come to see him was unlike anyone he had ever met in Russia before. The man gave his name as Frederick Bruce Thomas, and claimed he was an American citizen who owned valuable property in Moscow. He explained that his passport had been stolen from him several months earlier during his harrowing escape by train from Moscow and that he had no other documents to prove his identity; neither did his Swedish wife and four children. He was presenting himself at the consulate to claim the protection for himself and his family to which his American origin entitled him.

As Frederick anticipated, his black skin and southern drawl identified him as convincingly as any official piece of paper could have done. But as he also surely knew, any assistance that Jenkins would

give was risky: it could be a return ticket to the world of American racism. During the past twenty years, every time Frederick had filled out an application to renew his passport in Western Europe or Russia, American consular officials had noted his skin color on it; the Europeans and Russians, by contrast, seemed never to care about such matters.

However, this time Frederick was facing an even bigger risk. He had concealed something very important about himself when he met Jenkins, and could not be sure he would not be found out. Four years earlier, soon after the Great War began, in a move that may have been without precedent for a black American, Frederick became a citizen of the Russian Empire. He had thus automatically forfeited his right to American citizenship, and this meant that he no longer had any moral or legal claim on American protection. But Frederick never told the United States consulate in Moscow what he had done; and, as far as he knew, the Imperial Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, which presented his petition to Tsar Nicholas II for approval, had also not informed the United States embassy in Petrograd. As a result, neither Jenkins nor any other American official, in Russia or in Washington, was likely to have known the truth.

It was Frederick's good fortune that Jenkins had no reason to doubt his story. During the past year, many people escaping from Bolshevik Moscow had experienced far worse than stolen documents. Trains lumbering across the lawless and war-torn expanses of Russia constantly risked attacks by armed bands, both political and criminal, who robbed and murdered civilians at will. And because black Americans were hardly known in Russia, Jenkins could never have imagined that Frederick was anything other than what he claimed to be, even if Jenkins had never heard of Frederick's fabulous career as a rich theater owner in Moscow. The consul therefore accepted that the smooth-talking, sophisticated, middle-aged black man with the big smile was an American, although he would qualify this in his official report to the State Department by noting that "Mr. Frederick

Thomas” was “colored.” Jenkins also dutifully added him, his wife, and their four children to the list of people he would try to get on board a ship.

The choice for Frederick had been stark: to lie to Jenkins and escape, or to stay in Odessa and risk death. When, in the first months of 1919, it became increasingly obvious that the French were not going to succeed in nurturing a White Russian crusade against the Bolsheviks—a prospect that had originally made refugees in the city delirious with joy—the hopes of people like Frederick that they would be able to return home and reclaim their former lives and property began to sink. In a paradoxical reversal, the Russian citizenship that had provided Frederick with valuable protection in Moscow during the outburst of patriotism at the beginning of the Great War had now become a liability. The Bolshevik Revolution had destroyed the society that had embraced him and allowed him to prosper. His theaters and other property had been nationalized and his wealth stolen. In the poisonous atmosphere of class warfare that the Bolsheviks created, he risked arrest and execution simply for having been rich. By contrast, nationals of the United States and the other Allied powers who had succeeded in getting to the French-controlled enclave in Odessa could turn to their countries’ diplomatic representatives for help. And because after the war the Allies had sent a large fleet to Constantinople, the capital of the defeated Ottoman Empire, and transformed the Black Sea into their dominion, the diplomats were backed up by real military strength.

The hour was late, but the news Jenkins had gotten was so shocking that he decided he could not wait until morning. He immediately began to contact all the Americans in the city, instructing them to gather their belongings as quickly as possible and to get to the harbor while they could still find cabs. He also started burning all the coded telegrams in the consulate and packing the secret codebooks. By

working through the night, Jenkins was able to round up the entire group. And by early in the morning on Thursday, April 3, he had gotten them onto two ships: HMS *Skirmisher*, which had agreed to take most of the American consular and other officials; and *Imperator Nikolay*, a Russian ship that the French had placed at the disposal of the consuls from several Allied countries—France, Great Britain, Greece, and the United States. The American contingent on *Imperator Nikolay* was one of the smallest: in addition to sixteen other civilians, it included Frederick; his wife, Elvira; and his three sons, who ranged in age from four to twelve—Bruce, Frederick Jr., and Mikhail. There was supposed to be a fourth child, his seventeen-year-old daughter Olga, but she had unexpectedly disappeared at the last minute and no one knew where she was.

Olga was not staying with the rest of the family and had been put up in a hotel. Perhaps this was because of the severe overcrowding and shortage of rooms in a city filled with refugees, or perhaps her relations with Elvira, her stepmother, were strained, as they would be later for her brother, Mikhail. Whatever the reason, the sudden call from Jenkins late at night had caught Frederick by surprise. As he rushed to gather his wife, sons, and what little luggage they could take with them, he turned to the British Acting Consul General Henry Cooke, who was working with Jenkins, for help in getting word to Olga to come to the ship without delay. Cooke agreed to send someone to Olga's hotel. But when the messenger returned, he brought the distressing news that she had already left and that her new address was unknown. It was possible, Cooke suggested, that Olga had decided to try to get on board one of the other ships in the harbor.

There was no way to verify this during the Thomases' flight through the sleeping city. And once he was on board, Frederick could not risk going back on shore. At any moment, word of the evacuation could leak out, and then Odessa would erupt, and the streets would become impassable. Despite the relief he felt because his wife and

sons were almost out of danger, it must have been excruciating to wait within easy reach of the shore, helpless to do anything.

The hurry to get on board also cost Frederick what remained of his fortune. At its peak on the eve of the February Revolution in 1917, it had amounted to about \$10 million in today's currency. All he had left now was what he happened to have on hand—"less than \$25," as he later described the sum, which is equivalent to perhaps a few hundred now. Thursday, April 3, also proved to be the last day that any of Odessa's banks were open and clients could make withdrawals, but Frederick had boarded *Imperator Nikolay* before they opened.

As the sun climbed higher over the city, the anxiety of rushing to the ship was gradually eclipsed by the tedium of waiting. *Imperator Nikolay* continued to sit at anchor as one delay followed another. First, there were problems with the engines, which needed twenty-four hours to get up steam in any case. Then the crew suddenly deserted in support of pro-Bolshevik workers in the city and replacements had to be found. More and more refugees kept boarding, including many Russians. The French had still not announced the evacuation officially, although rumors were spreading and agitation in the city was growing.

Finally, on the following morning, Friday, April 4, d'Anselme published in the Odessa newspapers the announcement of an immediate evacuation. A Russian naval officer, Prince Andrey Lobanov-Rostovsky, saw what happened in the London Hotel when people heard the news and when they suddenly realized that they would need exit visas from the French to get on board a ship:

In an instant bedlam reigned. . . . The lobby was filled with wildly gesticulating people. The elevators were jammed. Two streams of humanity, going up and down the stairs, met on the landings between floors, where free-for-all fights took place. Women caught in the crush were shrieking, and from these landings valises came tumbling down on the heads of those who were below in the lobby.

Adding to the chaos was a violent mob that had gathered in the street and was trying to force its way into the hotel. A unit of French soldiers, rifles at the ready, took up positions in the lobby behind the bolted doors. With great difficulty, and “risking being crushed,” Lobanov-Rostovsky pushed his way to the upper floor, where he “succeeded in getting past some hundred people who were hammering at the doors of the rooms occupied by headquarters, claiming visas.” Once inside, he got a written order allowing him to board a ship leaving that morning; he then escaped by a back door and hastened to the port. The steamer on which Lobanov-Rostovsky got passage turned out to be the same one that had been designated for foreigners, *Imperator Nikolay*, so his memoirs provide a glimpse of the fate he shared with Frederick.

The panic was even worse in the harbor because the ships that were supposed to carry the refugees to safety were within sight and almost within reach. In Jenkins’s words, the “confusion was indescribable.” A crush of tens of thousands of panicked civilians poured down the streets from the upper city and flooded onto the docks, trying to get past armed Allied sentries, struggling with their luggage and waving their documents in the air.

Discipline among the French colonial troops and other Allied troops had been weak to begin with. The sudden evacuation eroded it further. Greek soldiers on the docks hacked at the engines of brand-new automobiles with axes, then pushed them into the water, so that the Bolsheviks would not get them. Cooke saw drunken soldiers looting supplies they were supposed to be evacuating while their officers stood by and watched. Just before setting sail, a British captain noticed several drunken French soldiers from Senegal grab two young Russian women who were on the dock and push them screaming into a shed. He intervened and was able to get the women on board his ship. As he went up the gangplank behind them, one of the soldiers ran alongside with his rifle and took a shot at him, but missed.

At last, before dawn on Sunday, April 6, 1919, *Imperator Nikolay* weighed anchor and set its course for Constantinople, four hundred miles across the Black Sea. Bolshevik troops were already entering Odessa. They were a rough and unimposing-looking band of only three thousand men. Even though numerous armed workers in the city supported them, the French evacuation of tens of thousands of troops in the face of such a weak force seemed especially cowardly.

For the Russians on board it was a deeply poignant moment. As *Imperator Nikolay* churned into the darkness, the last vestige of their homeland was disappearing off the stern. The electrical station in Odessa was not working, and there were no lights visible in the city except for a red glare from the fires that were breaking out in various quarters. The occasional cries and gunfire that had been audible near the shore no longer reached the ship, and the only sounds were the thrum of the engines and the murmur and shuffling of passengers on deck. The sea was calm.

For Frederick, the moment would have been no less moving. This was the second time in his life that he tasted the bitterness of exile. The first happened thirty years ago, when he escaped to Memphis with his parents after a white planter tried to steal their farm in Mississippi. Then, racial hatred had determined his fate. Now, it was class hatred, which for the Bolsheviks was as ingrained in the nature of existence as race was for most Americans. This was also the second time that a sea voyage marked a major change in his life. Twenty-five years ago, when he crossed the Atlantic from New York to London, he was young, had aspirations, and was eager to see something of the world. Now, he was forty-seven, had lost more in Russia than most men ever dream of having, and was unlikely to be surprised by anything else that life could still throw his way. He was also leaving Odessa almost twenty years to the month after he had arrived in Russia, a country that had been as unknown to him then as Turkey was now.

Overnight, most of the refugees aboard *Imperator Nikolay* had become homeless paupers heading into an unknown future, and for many the conditions on board deepened their emotional suffering. The ship had been built just before the war and was designed to carry 374 passengers in comfort; now, it was crammed to overflowing with 868 refugees. With the exception of some rich people who managed to get a few private cabins, the conditions for almost everyone else were very hard. Picton Bagge, the British attaché who had brought Jenkins word of the evacuation, was also on the ship and was shocked by how cruel the French were, especially to the defenseless Russians, who had no diplomats to protect them:

The filth on board was almost indescribable and nothing could be obtained except by payment. A glass of water, for instance, cost 5 rubles. The men had to wash by drawing up buckets from the sea, whilst the women had to pay 25 rubles each to go into a cabin where they could wash. . . . The French went out of their way to ill-treat and insult them, and the ill-feeling which had been growing during the French occupation of Odessa had now become one of intense hatred.

Even though Jenkins was aboard another ship, Frederick and his family were still under official American protection and were thus probably spared some of the overt brutality that the French inflicted on others. Nonetheless, the passage could not have been easy, especially for Elvira and the boys.

After a voyage of some forty hours, on the evening of April 7, *Imperator Nikolay* entered the Bosphorus, the narrow strait separating Europe from Asia, and anchored a few miles south of the Black Sea, near Kavaka, a small town on the European shore now called Rumeli Kavagi. The site was then, and still is, dominated by the ruins of an ancient castle, with its twin, also ruined, on the Asian side. These enigmatic monuments from the Byzantine and Genoese past were

among the first sights that *Imperator Nikolay*'s passengers saw that showed them how far they had traveled from home. Other steamers from Odessa arrived that night, and by morning there were half a dozen, all overflowing with evacuees.

The refugees had reached what they thought would be safety only to discover that their ordeal was not over. French officers came on board *Imperator Nikolay* and posted Senegalese sentries everywhere. The passengers were treated like prisoners and ordered to disembark so that they could undergo medical examinations and quarantine on shore. Because there was an epidemic of typhus in Odessa and lice spread the disease, the Allies had made "severe delousing" mandatory for anyone arriving from Russia.

The French procedures were driven by legitimate public health concerns, but they were also humiliating and the guards treated the passengers harshly. Lobanov-Rostovsky described what Frederick and his family must have endured: "It was a pathetic sight to see the barges, overloaded with men, women, and children, leaving for the Kavaka quarantine station. Old men and women of good families and wealth, accustomed to luxury and courteous treatment, were stumbling down the gangway under the oaths and coarse shouts of French sergeants who were treating them like cattle."

The disinfection itself was painfully slow and primitive. Once the barges docked, men and women were separated and made to enter a barrack-like building through different doors. Inside, they were ordered to undress, to put all their clothes in mesh bags, and then to proceed into what proved to be a large communal shower room. There they had to wash as best they could, after which they moved into a third hall, where, eventually, their bags were tossed back to them. One young man recalled how shocked he was when he saw what had happened to his clothing. The delousing process consisted of putting the bags through a chamber filled with high-temperature steam that was supposed to kill any vermin. But the heat and moisture also warped and scorched leather shoes, shrank fabrics, and baked

wrinkles into garments that could not be smoothed out. Women in particular were distressed to see their dresses ruined, which stripped them of the last vestiges of their dignity.

The Americans had not been at war with Turkey. However, they were allies of the occupying powers in Constantinople, and had important diplomatic and commercial interests in the country, which they supported with a squadron of warships. Jenkins and his group might have expected to benefit from their special status, but this did not happen. As much as a week after *Imperator Nikolay* arrived at Kavaka, the commander in chief of the Allied army in the East, the French general Franchet d'Espèrey, was still declining all requests from senior representatives of the other Allies for authorization to allow their nationals into the city, before they went through delousing and passport controls. Some of the refugees bribed guards and managed to slip away, to the great annoyance of the French. In light of Thomas's experience greasing palms in Moscow and the discomfort suffered by his family, he must have been tempted, even though he had very little money.

Despite such hardships, whatever doubts any of the refugees had about evacuating with the French were quickly dispelled. Within days of the Bolshevik occupation of Odessa, reports began to arrive about the reign of terror that they initiated against the city's remaining "bourgeoisie." They levied a tribute of 500 million rubles in cash on residents whose names were published in local newspapers. Those who did not pay were thrown into prison or forced to do manual labor, such as cleaning the city's streets. The Cheka, Lenin's dreaded secret police, began a campaign of bloody revenge against the Soviet state's political and class enemies. Hundreds were tortured and executed, including women and children. The nine-year-old heir of an old Polish noble family, the Radziwills, was purportedly killed to stop the family's succession. People became so desperate that they tried to escape from Odessa at night in small boats, hoping to reach Greek and French ships at sea. After he got to Constantinople, Frederick

would attempt to find out what happened to Olga, but he would not learn anything about her fate for several years.

In the meantime, even after delousing, the Allied groups faced still more hurdles. The ship that would take them the dozen miles south to Constantinople had to be disinfected. Nationals were also kept together for the first dozen days and put under medical surveillance to see if they developed any signs of typhus. Judging by the time they spent in transit, Frederick and his family were forced to go through all the steps of this rigorous plan. Communiqués exchanged by the French authorities indicate that no Allied passengers from *Imperator Nikolay* were released into the city prior to April 17, and the Thomases arrived on April 20, a full two weeks after leaving Odessa. The experience of the evacuation had been so traumatic that Jenkins felt he was on the verge of a “nervous collapse” and soon applied to his superiors for transfer “immediately to a quiet post in a civilized country.” The refugees did not have this luxury.

Kavaka is little more than an hour from Constantinople by boat, but the approach down the narrow, sinuous channel of the Bosphorus provides no foretaste of the grand panorama that lies ahead. The country on either side is rustic and quietly picturesque, with an occasional village, hotel, or mansion on the shore and an old ruin on a hilltop. Only when the boat navigates a final, right turn and the steep banks part does the entire magnificent city unexpectedly swing into view.

The first sight of Constantinople is breathtaking. Straight ahead, shimmering in the distance and dominating the promontory known as Seraglio Point, stands the old Topkapi Palace and beside it, rising into the sky, are the delicate minarets and giant domes of the mosques in Stambul, the ancient Byzantine and Muslim heart of the city. By the water’s edge on the right, the boat soon passes the sultan’s Dolmabahçe Palace—a vast, low building of gleaming white marble, its straight lines softened by elaborate carvings that look like frozen sea

foam. Minutes later, the small houses by the shore begin to multiply and swarm up the steep slopes of Galata and Pera, the European sections of the city, over which stands the stubby cylinder of the Galata Tower. To the left, across a mile-wide expanse of choppy water, is Scutari, Constantinople's foothold in Asia. As the boat approaches the dock near the Custom House on the Galata shore, yet another body of water comes into view on the right—the Golden Horn, a long natural harbor separating Stambul from Galata and spanned by a low-lying bridge. The entire vast waterway is filled with vessels: dozens of gray European and American warships, ferries churning back and forth, rusty freighters, and countless small boats under sail or with oars bobbing in every direction.

Frederick had suffered the kinds of losses in Russia that many weaker and less savvy men would have been unable or unwilling even to try to recoup. When he landed in Constantinople, he had hardly any money and no way to support his wife and sons. Because he had no documents, it was unclear how the diplomats in the American consulate general would treat him. He was, for the first time, in a non-Western country, one that was in turmoil as its centuries-old traditions crumbled and rapacious European politicians plotted its dismemberment.

But he still had his wits, drive, and experience. And it was not in his nature to yield to despair, or to settle for a modest compromise. He resolved instead to reinvent himself once again, to match wits with the historical forces that had brought him to Constantinople, and to gamble big in an effort to rebuild all that he had lost.

THE MOST SOUTHERN PLACE ON EARTH

Despite their remarkable success, Hannah and Lewis Thomas could never have imagined what the future had in store for their newborn son, who lay swaddled in their log cabin on November 4, 1872, and whom they decided to name, very grandly, Frederick Bruce. They had been slaves until the Civil War, but in 1869, four years after it ended, a sudden reversal of fortune gave them their own two-hundred-acre farm in Coahoma County, Mississippi, in the northwestern corner of the state known as the Delta.

As black landowners, the Thomases were in the smallest of minorities. Out of some 230 farms in Coahoma County in 1870, blacks owned only half a dozen, and the Thomases' was the second largest of these. Their achievement was all the rarer because in the years after the war, blacks in the Delta still outnumbered whites nearly four to one. Most of the land was owned by a handful of white families; many other whites, like most blacks, owned nothing.

Early in 1869, before the spring planting season had started, at a public auction in front of the courthouse door in Friars Point, a town on the Mississippi River that was then the Coahoma County seat, Lewis bid on a sizable piece of land consisting of fields, forests,

swamps, and streams (called “bayous” in the Delta). It had belonged to a white farmer who had lived in another county and died without a will; as a result, the probate court had instructed the man’s lawyer to sell the property for whatever he could get. Lewis probably knew the farm well. It was near the land in the Hopson Bayou neighborhood, about twenty-five miles southeast of Friars Point, that still belonged to his former masters, the Cheairs brothers. When the auction was over, Lewis had won with a top bid of ten cents an acre. He had three years to pay the total of \$20 in annual installments of $\$6.66\frac{2}{3}$ each, with interest at 6 percent. Even with the severe economic depression in the Delta after the Civil War, this was an extremely low price.

The Thomases did not wait long and set to working their farm that same spring. Their first season was a stunning success. The value of all their crops was estimated at \$5,100, equivalent to approximately \$80,000 today. In less than a year, they had recouped their first installment many hundreds of times over and had become one of the most successful black families in the region.

Nature created the conditions in the Delta that allowed human ingenuity and effort to succeed. Despite its name, the Delta is the Mississippi River’s inland flood plain, and is located some three hundred miles upstream from the Gulf. Coahoma County was still a semi-wilderness in the decades after the Civil War, and its character and appearance were largely products of the Mississippi’s annual spring floods. The dark alluvial soil these deposited, combined with the long and hot summers, made the region extraordinarily fertile. Well into the beginning of the twentieth century, Coahoma County was a dense forest of giant cypress, tupelo, and sweet gum trees, as well as sycamore, poplar, pecan, maple, and numerous other species. Many of the trees were as thick as a man is tall and soared a hundred feet or more. Amid the trees were jungle-like growths of underbrush, vines, and cane, in many places fifteen to twenty feet high, which made pas-

sage extremely difficult. The interlacing network of swamps, lakes, and bayous created by the spring floods further impeded travel by land. Roads were hard to build and water was the primary means of transportation throughout the nineteenth century.

After the county was formed in 1836 from what had been Indian lands, word spread quickly that cotton grew there to an amazing six feet in height, nearly twice as tall as anywhere else in the South. Slave-owning whites were the dominant settlers from the start because intensive labor was necessary to clear the forests and drain the land for planting. They usually came by water, often on Mississippi riverboats, which were the simplest means of transporting large and heavy loads. After reaching the Delta, they transferred their families, cattle, slaves, and other possessions onto shallow-draft flatboats that they poled via sinuous paths, turning whichever way the interconnected bodies of water allowed, until they reached a likely bank on which to land.

At first, cultivated fields were narrow strips along rivers and bayous. It took years of arduous work for the slaves to expand them inland by felling the trees, uprooting the stumps, and clearing the brush and cane. Despite a rapid increase in settlers in Coahoma County, which encompasses nearly six hundred square miles, the population by 1860 was only 6,606, of whom 5,085 were slaves. And throughout the Delta as a whole at this time just 10 percent of the land was under cultivation.

Nevertheless, Coahoma and several other nearby river counties quickly became among the wealthiest in the entire country. When the Civil War began, cotton constituted 57 percent of total American exports, and the state of Mississippi alone grew one-quarter of it. This made the biggest slave owners rich and allowed them to live luxuriously. Over time, they built large mansions, filled them with expensive furniture, collected art, and traveled to Europe. During the fall and winter social seasons, they indulged in dinners, parties, and lavish balls.

By contrast, the lives of slaves were more brutal in the Delta than in most other places in the South because of the difficult terrain and the prolonged annual agricultural cycle that the warm climate made possible. The large financial investment that many planters made in what was then a remote location, and their hunger for profits from spectacular crops, caused them to drive their slaves especially hard. Working conditions were aggravated by the clouds of mosquitoes that bred in the standing water every spring. From April to September, these insects made life so unbearable that whites who could afford it would leave for resorts in the North or escape to higher and cooler ground. The Delta was also a singularly unhealthy place to work. Epidemics, including yellow fever and malaria, as well as various waterborne diseases, killed thousands. Blacks suffered more than whites, and black children were the most vulnerable population of all.

Little is known about Lewis and Hannah before they bought their farm. Slaves wrote very few memoirs because owners tried to keep them illiterate. Planters rarely kept detailed records about their slaves that went beyond the kinds of inventories used for cattle.

However, it is possible to surmise that like almost all other freedmen in the Delta, Lewis and Hannah worked the land between the end of the Civil War in April 1865 and early 1869, when he bid on their farm. This is how they could have earned the money necessary for the first annual installment. That they immediately became very successful when they struck out on their own implies that they were not novices.

When the Civil War ended, many freedmen believed that the federal government would institute land reforms by confiscating large plantations, dividing them into parcels, and giving the parcels to individual black farmers. This did not happen. The compromise solution that developed throughout the South was various forms of tenancy, especially sharecropping. Under this system, which was

already established in parts of the Delta by 1868 and would persist well into the twentieth century, a black family would rent a piece of land from a white owner in exchange for a percentage of the crops the family raised. The cost of whatever supplies and services the family received from the landowner, such as food, clothing, medical care, farming implements, and building materials, would be deducted from the family's share of the crop. However, because the tenant often had to pay the landowner as much as 50 percent of the crop, many freedmen remained impoverished. Those who did succeed in accumulating enough capital to be free of debt at the end of a harvest, and who thereby felt empowered to bargain with the landowners for better conditions during the next season, often tried to rent land. But landowners, as well as the Ku Klux Klan, tried to thwart black land rental, which they feared would deprive them of control over black labor and could lead to the widespread transfer of Delta lands from white hands to black. This may have been what Lewis faced prior to 1869. Nonetheless, his bid of \$20, with one-third down (equivalent to perhaps \$100 today), could have been within the financial reach of a family that worked either as hired hands or as sharecroppers.

Hannah and Lewis experienced the other hardships of black life in the Delta as well, including the region's notoriously high mortality rate. Frederick had three older brothers and one sister—Yancy, who was born a slave in 1861; William, who was born free in 1867; Kate, born around 1868; and John, born in 1870. Two died young—Kate around 1870, and William a few years later. Frederick left no recollections of any of these siblings, and nothing further is known about them.

Frederick's mother, Hannah, died when she was around thirty-five; she may have died giving birth to him in 1872. Lewis then married another woman, India, who was a few years younger than Hannah. She was born in Alabama in 1843, and was probably brought to the Delta before the Civil War by a white planter. Frederick would later identify India as his mother, and this confirms that she entered his life when he was very young and raised him.